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Exploring endangered languages: A story from the Amazon

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Alexandra Aikhenvald, Professor of Linguistics at JCU, working on Kumandene Tariana in Santa Terezinha, Amazonas, Brazil (2012)

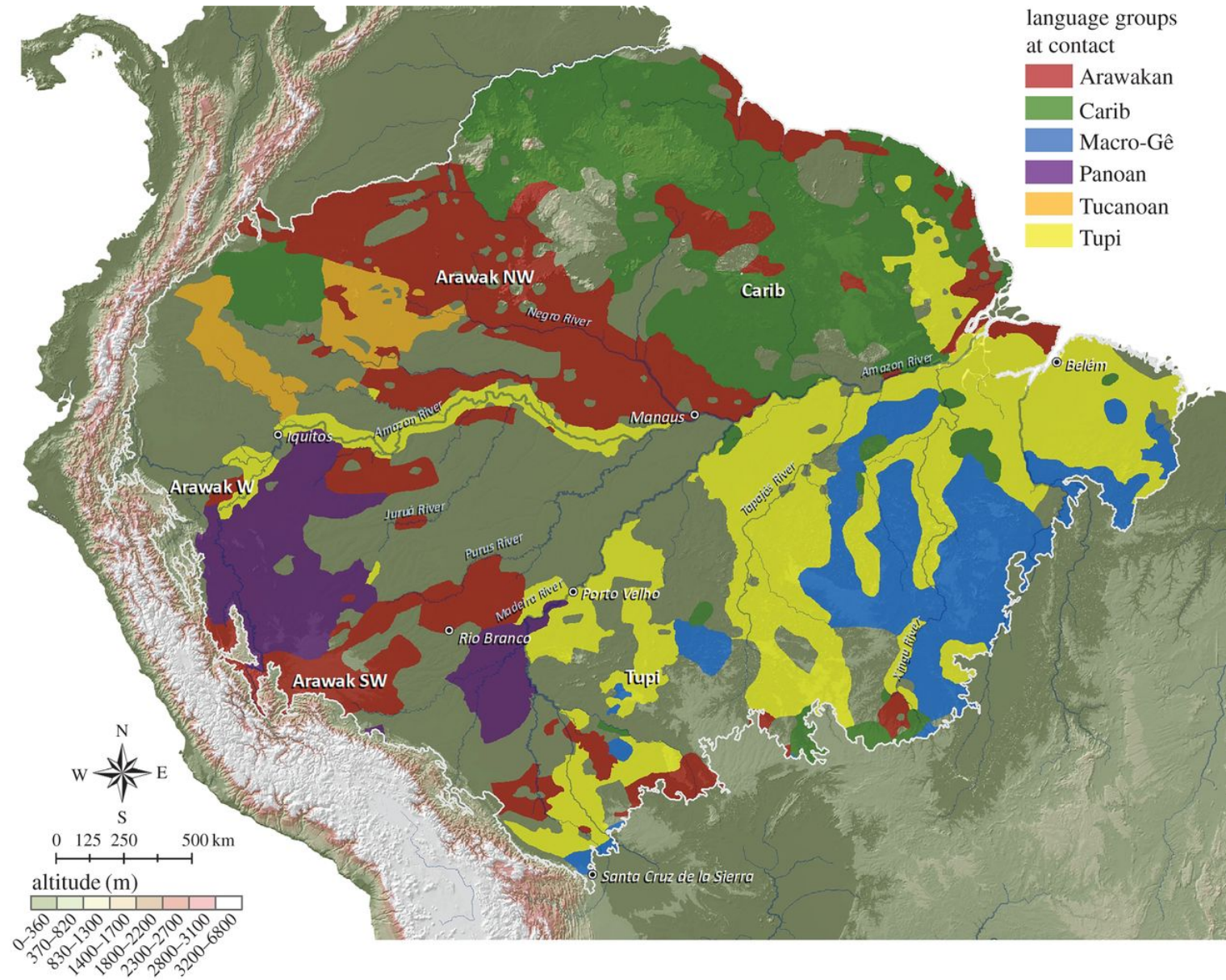
A stylized world map with a dark blue background and light green landmasses. The continent of South America is highlighted in a bright yellow color. The text "SOUTH AMERICA" is written in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters, centered over the map.

SOUTH AMERICA

The Amazon Basin



The languages of the Amazon



Why did I become a linguist?



Why did I become a linguist?



The words

barbeque

canoe

cashew

cannibal

hammock

are of Amazonian origin!



INDIANA JONES
and the
KINGDOM OF
THE CRYSTAL SKULL

Hello Здравейте Hola مالهس Добры дзень
 Bonjour Kaixo
 Hei
 Sannu Pozdravljeni
 Helló ಹಲೋ
 안녕하세요.
 Fwptk 2kq
 Bok Cześć
 شوخ
 你好
 Ola
 Te āheitanga katoa
 Përshëndetje
 Dia duit
 Привет
 Helo नमस्ते
 Saluton Sveiki
 Zdravo Здравствуйते
 Olá הלען Hallo Ahoj
 नमस्कार Merhaba
 Salve
 वैले
 Salam
 Chao Hallå Habari Γεια σας
 हेलो Hej हॅलो Bonjou హలో



Why did I become a linguist?



Why the Amazon?



Armchair linguist



Field linguist





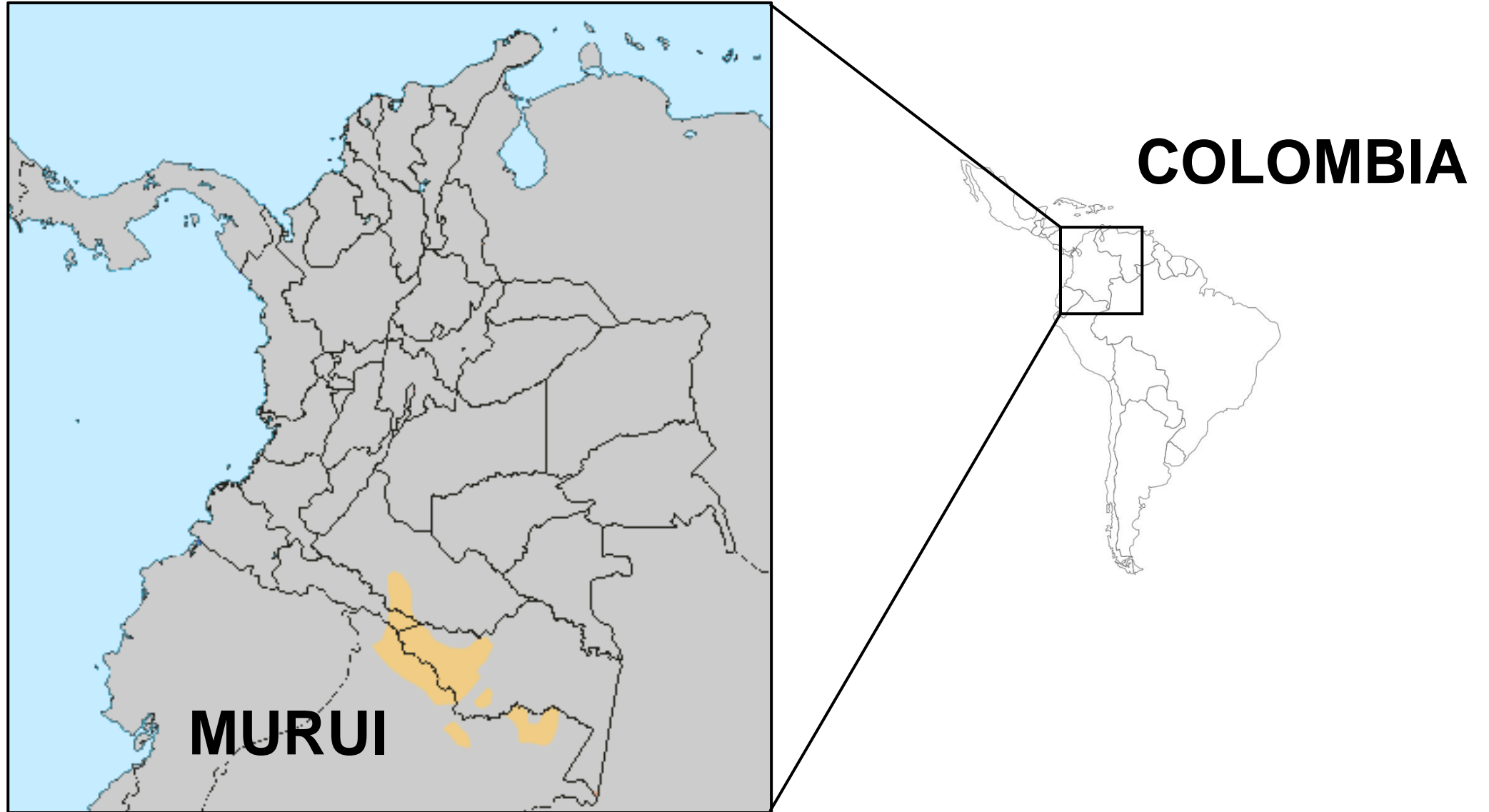


**DO IT WITH
PASSION
OR NOT AT ALL**

Members of the Language and Culture Research Centre



The Murui people and their language



WITOTOAN LANGUAGES

MURUI

NONUYA

OKAINA

INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

GERMAN

ENGLISH

SPANISH

MURUI = WITOTO

Are there groups
to the south?

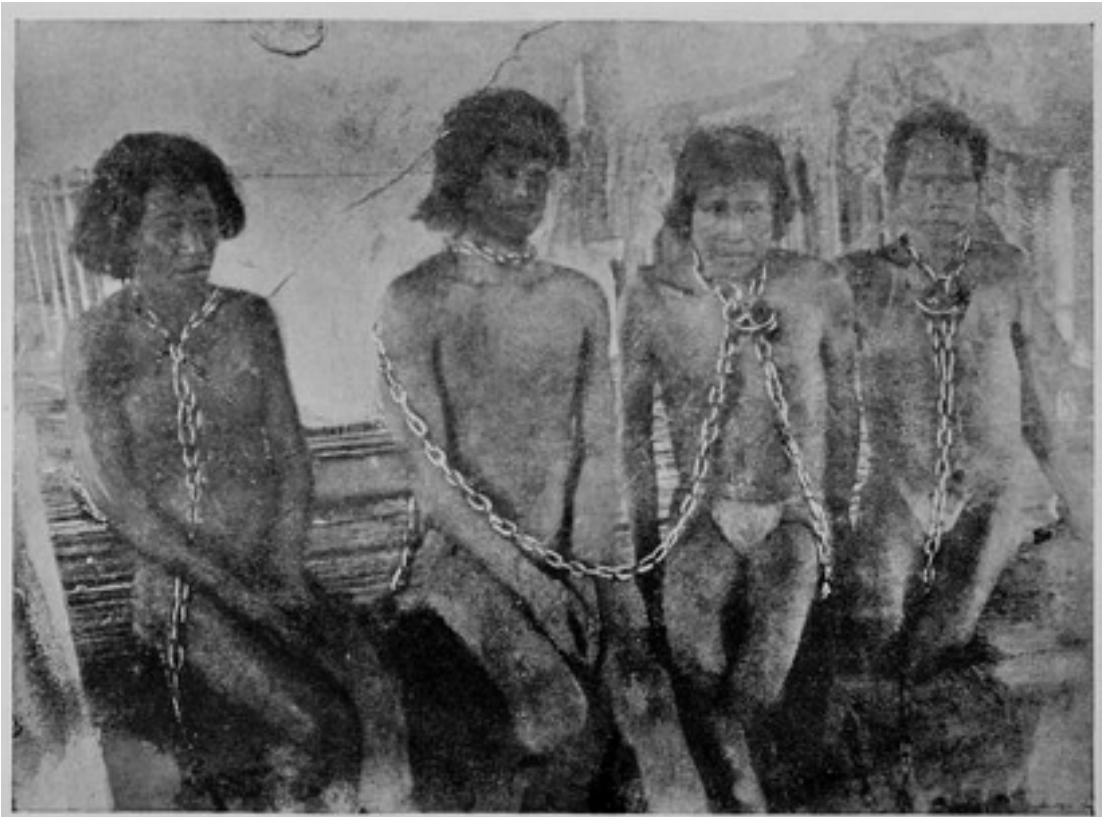


Yes, we call them
'WITOTO'!

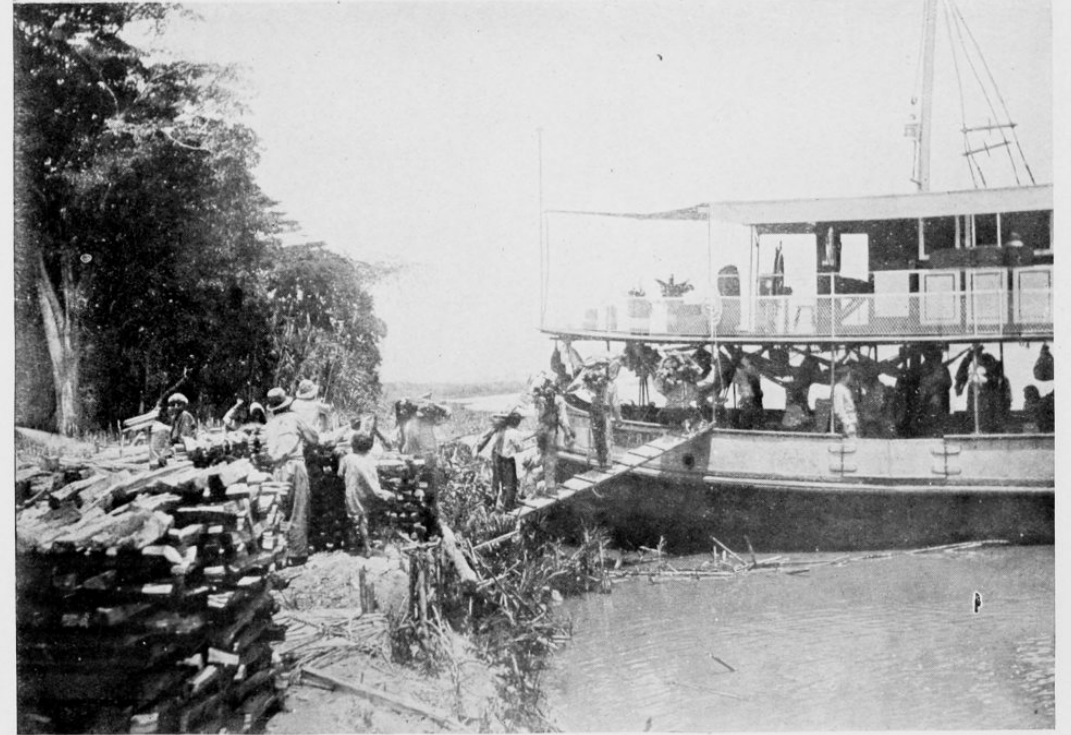
The Rubber Boom (1879 – 1910)



Tragedy of Rubber Boom in the Amazon



CHAINED INDIAN RUBBER GATHERERS IN THE STOCKS: ON THE PUTUMAYO RIVER.



RUBBER-COLLECTING RIVER LAUNCH.

[To face p. 176.]

Pictures taken from:

Hardenburg, Walter Ernest. 1912. *The Putumayo: The Devil's Paradise. Travels in the Peruvian Amazon region and an account of the atrocities committed upon the Indians therein.* London: T. Fisher Unwin.

Modern Murui



The venture into the Amazon



The first encounter



Lucinda (*Riberiño*) of the *Gidoni* clan
and Jimenaki (RIP)

The possum *jimenaki* (RIP 2010)



The Murui community of '*Kilometro 11*', Amazonas, Colombia





My first Murui words:

Murui

English

bie = this

kue = my

jimenaki = possum

Bie kue jimenaki! 'This (is) my possum!'

The possum *jimenaki* (RIP)

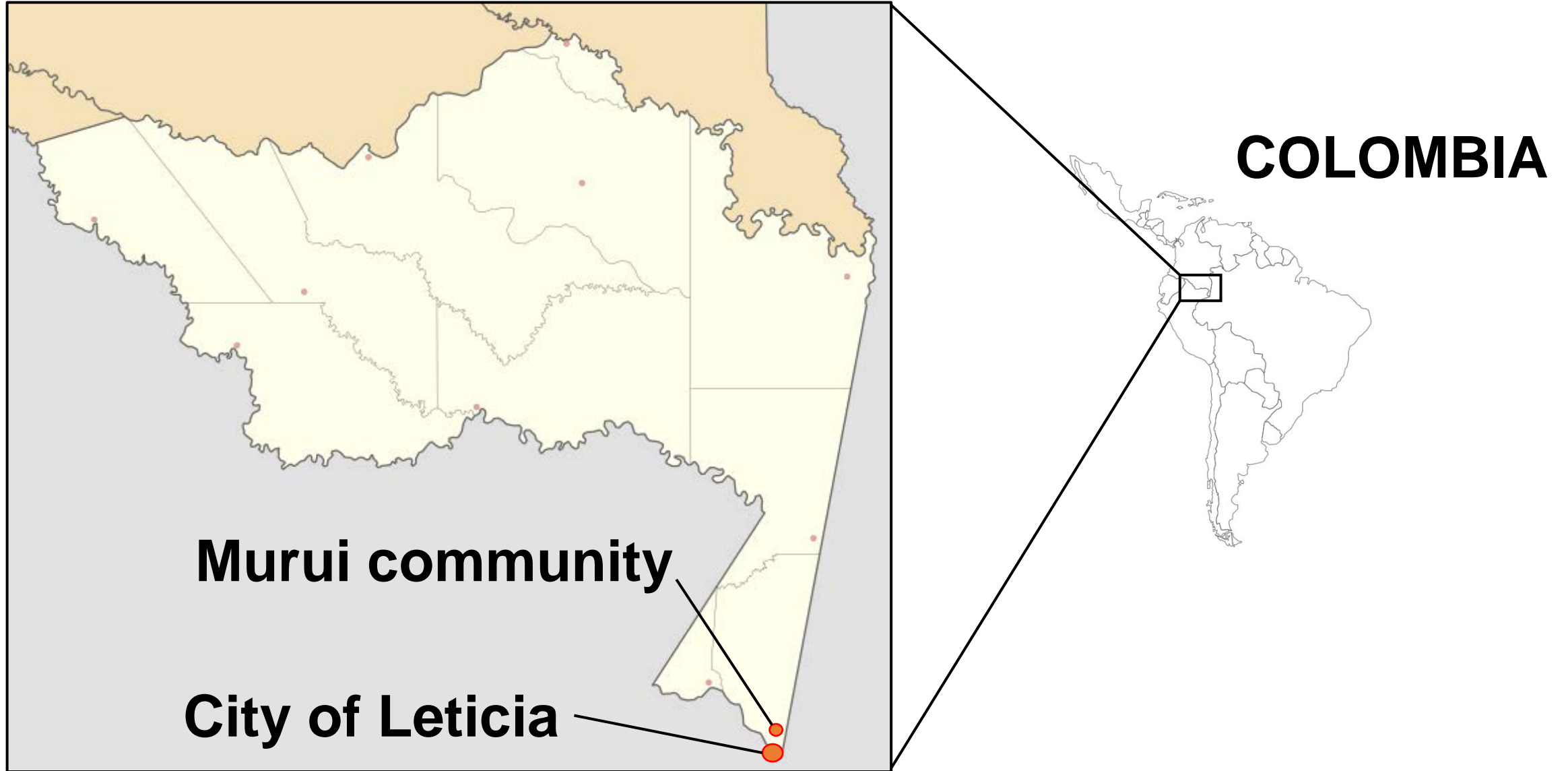


The first encounter with Murui

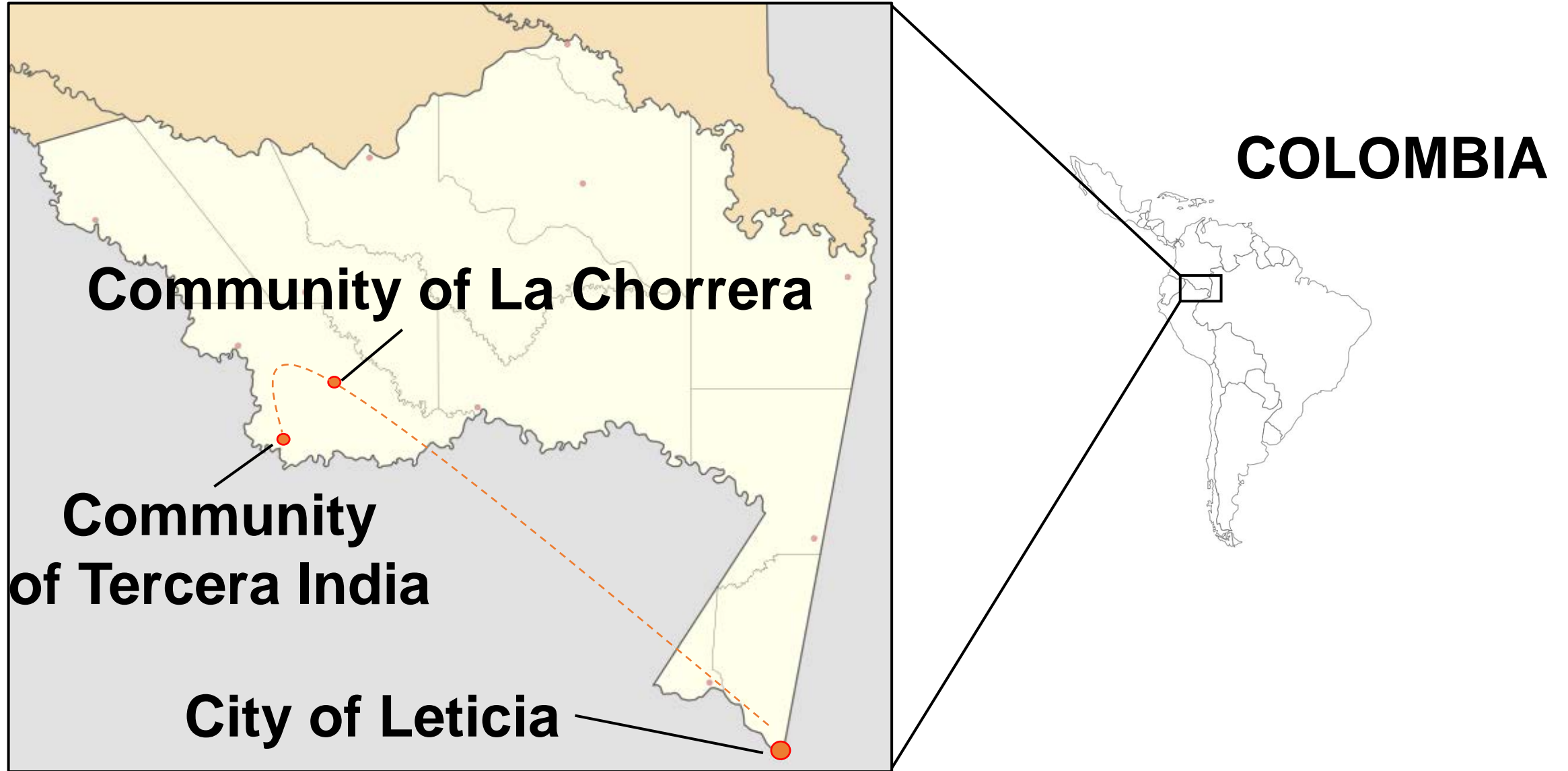


You said: “Bie kue jimenaki! This (is) my possum!” People say this when they are hungry! If not hungry, why would you say kue jimenaki!?”

The Murui people and their language



The Murui people and their language



Journey to the Tercera India community



Journey to the Tercera India community



Language immersion and documentation



Life in the Tercera India community



The Tercera India community







Dobairaiñaiño

=

‘the one who turns (words) upside down’

Why is it important to work on minority languages?

There are currently about 6,000 languages spoken on Earth.

Linguists estimate that three of quarters languages spoken today will become extinct in the next century.

What happens when a language disappears?

No record of the people's knowledge and history.



Egyptian hieroglyphs



Mayan glyphs

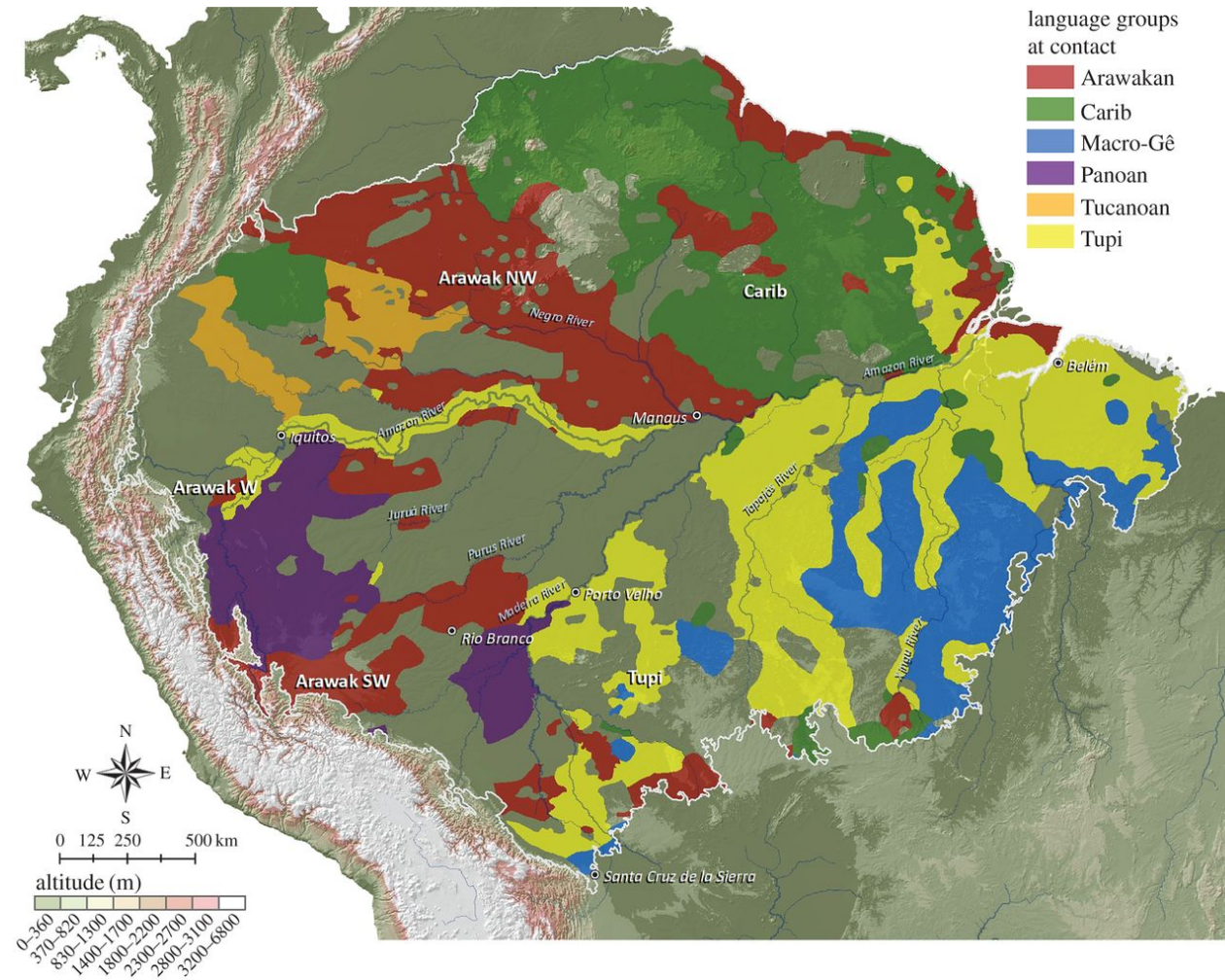
The Amazonian languages

- developed for more than ten thousand years
- belong to many distinct language families
- very complex in their grammatical structures
- no written tradition

The Amazonian languages

- population between 2-5 million before the first contact (1492)
- massive extinction of native groups after the contact
- Amazonian groups are very small (between 500 - 2,000 speakers on average)
- only a few languages have large numbers of speakers (e.g. Guarani with over 5 million of speakers)

Why do the Amazonian languages disappear?



Why do the Amazonian languages disappear?

- globalization
- urbanization
- bilingual speakers shifting from using two languages to using the language which is more 'prestigious'

What can we do?

- national policies to recognize and protect minority languages
- promote bilingual education
- help from community members and linguists
- awareness of the community

Why should young Australians be interested in studying languages?

- enrich your cultural experience by knowing other person's language!
- experience the cultural diversity in the world!
- understand other cultures!
- understand your own culture!
- And... ANY language will do!



**MAKE
IT
MATTER
AND
BECOME
A LINGUIST!**